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The Tendency for Distinction through the Lens of Bourdieu's Theories and the Formation of Kitsch in Contemporary Iranian Architecture

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Abstract

There is a consensus among experts that the form of contemporary Iranian architecture has become disordered and is devoid of the rich culture of traditional architecture, and the result of the aforementioned discontinuity has been the facades of contemporary Iranian cities. Perhaps, in a gradual and process-oriented approach, sociological criticism of public taste and the basis of the formation and tendency of public taste can be the most effective approach from this point of view. In this regard, the current critique draws upon Bourdieu's distinction theory to seek the basic and extensive causes of the desires of the employer and the architect as the main actors in the field of architecture. It also considers them as factors shaping the image of contemporary Iranian cities. The results of the review indicate that employers have attempted to address a tendency for similarity in distinct ways in the upper class with low cultural capital but high economic capital and the middle class with low cultural capital but medium economic capital. Similarly, with the occupation of the architectural field by architects with low cultural capital who need to satisfy the sense of distinction in the mentioned classes, the tendency of public taste in the architectural form has changed. As a result, as time has elapsed, the formation of the image of contemporary cities has experienced discontinuity and chaos.

Keywords: Contemporary Iranian Architecture, Bourdieu, Form, Kitsch, Urban Facades

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How does the legal recognition of rural land in the rural guidance plan affect the socioeconomic aspects of villagers?

Extended Abstract

Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field, habitus, taste, and distinction, this study examines the socio-cultural mechanisms shaping contemporary Iranian architecture and its impact on urban aesthetics. In Bourdieu's framework, taste functions as a form of cultural capital, structuring class differentiation and symbolic boundaries. Within the architectural field, agents—architects and patrons—deploy economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital to construct forms that not only serve functional purposes but also manifest status identities. The research identifies architecture as a cultural commodity central to processes of class distinction in Iran. Upper-class actors with high cultural capital produce limited yet enduring works that embody refined taste and Iranian architectural identity, influencing the field without significantly shaping the mass urban image. More prevalent are projects produced by architects with low cultural capital for wealthy but culturally limited clients, replicating prestigious global or local styles in superficial form—what the study classifies as kitsch. A third and more imitative layer emerges when both architect and client possess low cultural capital, further reproducing "kitsch within kitsch" in pursuit of upward symbolic alignment. These hierarchical reproductions of form illustrate Bourdieu's theory that the upper class, through mechanisms of distinction, imposes "high" values against "low" ones, indirectly steering public taste. Over time, the cyclical imitation of elite forms by lower strata erodes their exclusivity, transforming them into mainstream urban trends. This process fuels a gradual cultural rupture in architectural practice, leading to an urban façade that is time-bound, eclectic, and detached from coherent heritage. Ultimately, the study foregrounds how architecture in contemporary Iran operates less as spatial creation and more as a signifying practice within status competition, where the pursuit of distinction under shifting taste regimes reconfigures both aesthetic norms and the visual identity of the city.

According to Alberti, within the highly stratified societies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the distinction between the "common people" and the "nobility" emerged as one of the central concerns of critics. Their conviction was that certain forms or styles were truly popular, as they catered to the pleasures and delights of the lower tastes or classes, whereas others were inherently noble and elevated, as they could only be appreciated and admired by tastes that had been cultivated and refined.

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